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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 RESPONDS TO BOMBINGS AND WEAPONS
FIRMLY

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) In response to the morning's bus bombings, Communications Minister Hamadeh told us on February 13 that the March 14 group planned to stiffen its line on the tribunal and forge ahead with plans for a robust turnout on the two-year commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's assassination. The bombings may have had as much to do with the previous week's confiscation of Amal or Hizballah weapons as with the upcoming commemoration. Planning for February 14 includes addresses by prominent Shia figures as well as the Sunni, Christian and Druse leadership of March 14. Talks between the two feuding political groups had broken down over details regarding the expansion of the cabinet and the confiscated weapons. Meanwhile, an increasingly active March 14 hopes to mobilize Saudi money, multilateral diplomacy and European public support to combat Syria and its Lebanese proxies. End Summary.

BUS BOMBINGS: A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

¶12. (S) The Ambassador and NEA/ELA Office Director Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley called on Communications Minister and Walid Jumblatt ally Marwan Hamadeh February 13. Polchief attended as notetaker. Hamadeh entered the meeting late, having just returned from a March 14 strategy meeting in response to the morning's bomb attacks against two buses in the north Metn area of Ain Alaq. Asked how March 14 would respond to the attacks, Hamadeh told us the group would announce publicly its intention to add back the provision on "Crimes Against Humanity" to its working draft for the international tribunal. Not only would that provision extend the tribunal's prosecutorial reach (in theory) but it would signal a toughening of the March 14 line and a raising of the stakes in the battle over the establishment of the tribunal. Those who oppose the tribunal might start to look at the current draft as the better option if they see the possibility of a tougher draft emerging.

¶13. (S) Despite the fact the bombing appeared to target March 14 supporters on their way to the commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's assassination, Hamadeh linked the event more directly to the previous week's tug-of-war over weapons confiscated from a Hizballah convoy by the Lebanese Armed

Forces (LAF). He noted that one of the buses had been rented by Defense Minister Elias Murr, who publicly defied Hizballah when the terrorist group demanded the return of its weapons, and that the February 14 commemoration plans included activities in Murr's home village (where the doomed buses began their daily commuter run). Hamadeh suggested that the fact the bombings occurred the day before the Hariri commemoration was, at least in part, a "coincidence." When asked, Hamadeh called security officials to confirm that the Internal Security Forces (ISF) has used USG-trained explosive investigation teams to investigate the bus bombings.

FEBRUARY 14 PLANS

¶4. (C) While Hamadeh admitted that no final decisions had been taken as yet, he said that the emergency morning meeting from which he had just returned had concluded that March 14 leaders should carry on with their plans for the following day. The leaders would reconvene at 5:00 PM at Saad Hariri's Qureitem residence and then have a final planning meeting later at Kata'eb Headquarters. Hamadeh promised us a readout from the Qureitem meeting.

¶5. (C) Apart from the top Sunni and Druse March 14 leaders, the February 14 commemoration will include addresses by Christian leaders including independent former MP Nassib Lahoud, journalist Ghassan Tueni, Minister Nayla Mouawad, Minister of State Michel Pharaon, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and former President Amine Gemayel. The lineup will also include Shia leaders Ahmad Al-Assad, son of former Parliament Speaker Kamel al-Assad and assassination attempt survivor; Tyre Mufti Ali al-Amin; and former MP Bassam Saaba, who exposed Hizballah financial crimes and, according to

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Hamadeh, was threatened by Rustom Ghazali with a bomb attack similar to that directed at Hamadeh. When the Ambassador raised questions about the planned inclusion of a Jama' Islamiyya speaker, Hamadeh said that it was important to show that Lebanon's Sunnis were united.

DIALOGUE STALLED

¶6. (C) Hamadeh reported to us that March 14 negotiator Ghattas Khoury's talks with Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil had deadlocked. The March 8 side had insisted the two sides' joint declaration publicly proclaim a 19 11 cabinet formula, even though their private talks had agreed the March 14 side could retain its interpretation of a 19 10 1 formula, which would guarantee the cabinet could not be toppled by another March 8 walkout.

¶7. (C) Also ruining the deal was last week's arms seizure. Khoury pointed out to Khalil (phrasing it as a rumor) that the confiscated weapons were, by their nature and apparent destination, intended to arm Amal fighters for street fighting in Beirut, not for liberation of the Shebaa Farms. Khoury made it clear to Khalil that the March 14 side knew the arms were destined for Amal and that March 14 would not hesitate to rearm also.

¶8. (S) Finally, Khoury warned Khalil that the GOL's rump cabinet might reconsider the July 2005 Ministerial Declaration, which enshrined Hizballah's right to bear and use heavy weapons as part of a "national resistance" to Israeli occupation of the Farms. Khalil, apparently stunned, warned March 14 not to pursue the arsenals of Amal and Hizballah. The Ministerial Declaration is indeed in play as a "chess piece we are advancing up the board," Hamadeh elaborated. March 14 would agree to no change in the cabinet without a revision of the Declaration, he insisted.

MARCH 14 STRATEGY

¶9. (S) In the wake of the dialogue's failure and increasing confrontation, Hamadeh met with March 14 leaders Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Samir Geagea at Qureitem on February 11 to discuss the coalition's strategy for the coming weeks. The group met for five hours and decided to proceed along three "dimensions" including (a) restoring the balance of power between March 14 and March 8, which Hamadeh explained includes Hariri's calling on Saudi financial help, but which may also have been intended to redress the arms gap between the two sides; (b) political maneuvering to realize the establishment of the tribunal, including a March 20 deadline to Berri for parliamentary approval or, failing that, an appeal for a Chapter 7 resolution from the UN Security Council; and (c) the launch of a series of new initiatives at the Hariri commemoration February 14.

¶10. (C) Never far from the group's mind, Hamadeh said, is the problem of Syria. Multilateral Iran sanctions have been more effective than those on Syria, he noted, but predicted (along with, he noted, Jacques Chirac, with whom Hamadeh had a private conversation in Paris on January 25) that Europe may be coming around to a realization that it must confront Syria and impose a cost for Damascus' behavior. Hamadeh had been nominated by March 14 to write an open letter to French presidential candidates advising them to reconsider Segolene Royal's appeal to broaden engagement with Syria and Iran. Syria might moderate its behavior in the leadup to the March Arab Summit, the Ambassador suggested; but Hamadeh noted that Damascus had boycotted the Summit before.

¶11. (S) March 14 would no longer merely hold the line, Hamadeh claimed, but the group would switch to offense. The Prime Minister is strong, he said, and communication between him and Saad Hariri is robust since the latter's return to Lebanon last weekend.

FELTMAN